

By Sidharth Mishra



The Monsoon winds are withdrawing and the period of the lockdown too is over. Having enjoyed an extended long-run of breathing clean air, the residents of the National Capital Region (NCR) should now get ready to lose some breath.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has planned a meeting with Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar. In the run-up to the meeting, Delhi CM has got flashed his sincerity to address the issue at hand by getting himself photographed with the scientists of Indian Agriculture Research Institute (IARI), Pusa. The scientists have invented a way to dispose of 'parali' (crop stubble) without burning.

But is stubble burning at the bottom the problem? Last year, when Delhi CM blamed the farmers of Punjab for 'choking' Delhi, Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amrinder Singh in a letter to Prime Minister wrote, "How can a country be called developed when its capital city has been reduced to a gas chamber, not by any natural disaster but a series of man-made ones?"

Stubble burning is part of a natural process which the farmers have practiced for ages. How come it's now being blamed for high level of pollutants in Delhi's post Monsoon air? There are, in fact, evidences which would show that 'parali' is not to be blamed alone. Last year at the peak of pollution, only 44 per cent of Delhi's PM 2.5 load was attributed to stubble burning in the neighbouring Punjab and Haryana.

Last autumn visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel had said, "Whoever looked at pollution in Delhi would find very good arguments to replace diesel buses with electric buses." Hope somebody in the government cared to point out to Merkel that buses operating in Delhi were CNG-fuelled and that the problem lay somewhere else. The exercises like odd-even car

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rationing schemes in the past have not fetched much result, as the problem doesn't lie with automobiles, which any way in Delhi run on a much cleaner fuel than other cities.

The problem actually rests in rampant urbanization and the political parties refusing to address the issue on the account of electoral gains and losses. In the run-up to the assembly polls last year, then Delhi BJP president Manoj Tiwari had gone hammer and tongs against anti-pollution crusader Bhure Lal, who heads the pollution monitoring committee constituted by the apex court, who had suggested some tough measures.

Unplanned expansion of the city, whose civic amenities are now bursting at the seams, is actually the major cause for pollution. Since 'parali' burning was always there, it's the pollution from construction sites which needs to be controlled.

Delhi has to develop a protocol to manage dust in air and allow construction only during the seasons when air quality is not being compromised from other sources like 'parali' burning. This would need a sincere and humongous application from Government machinery. Setting up such a protocol would also invite a lot of pressure from various lobbies and the government would need to show the political will to overcome such pressures.

Small and marginal farmers, who do not have the wherewithal to manage stubble in their fields, start burning in Punjab and Haryana from mid-October and it peaks during first week of November. These 20-25 days are most difficult to breathe Delhi air.

The state and the centre could plan in advance to set-up a protocol banning construction work during the period. But given the extended period of lockdown in the past months, this would be a tall order. Thus the escape from bad air for now looks to be a far-fetched thought.

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